Blogpost – California Study Trip – February 2015 – Cam Brown

[MI Sustainable Winegrowing Trip – Day 1](http://5lakesenergy.com/mi-sustainable-winegrowing-trip-day-1/)

In our first day of meetings in California, our group was fortunate enough to absorb the perspective of individuals and organizations that have helped shaped sustainable winegrape growing throughout California. It became evident that public private partnerships, research and education, and integration of sustainability into business strategy have played a large role in the success of the California programs, wineries and vineyards.

Our day began with a tour led by Karen Block of the [Robert Mondavi Institute at UC Davis](http://robertmondaviinstitute.ucdavis.edu/) and the recently completed [Jess S. Jackson Sustainable Winery](http://wineserver.ucdavis.edu/about/facilities/Jess-S-Jackson.html). The facilities at UC Davis synthesize education and research with the spaces to practice winemaking techniques. Within a stone’s throw from classrooms, students work on vineyards, and in the cellar (with a classroom built in) on practices that will improve wine quality, increase operation efficiency, and reduce natural resource use. The Jess S. Jackson Sustainable Winery highlights the importance of public-private partnerships in the wine industry. UC Davis researchers contribute to the body of literature that impact sustainable wine production practices, and the needs of the industry help direct the research. Nowhere is this relationship more evident than the modular research stations in the sustainable winery that act as incubation space for the next generation of sustainable wine technology.

Over lunch, we learned about the development over the last 25 years of Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing from Matt Hoffman, the Grower Program Coordinator with the [Lodi Winegrape Commission](http://www.lodiwine.com/). Lodi Rules grew out of interest in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) from a group of growers in the Lodi Crush District 11. Since its inception, Lodi has grown into an accredited program by Protected Harvest that has utilized on by wine industry organizations around the state and across the country as the basis for development of their own state programs. The Lodi Winegrape Commission’s success stems from a commitment to the growers of Lodi; growers in Lodi are invested in the program and certification because of the value their operations gain from the research and education that the Commission leads or develops through collaboration with research institutions.

Our day concluded at [The Lucas Winery](http://www.lucaswinery.com/) with David Lucas and Stanton Lange. From a vineyard management and winery business strategy persperctive, The Lucas Winery and the efforts of Stanton Lange’s vineyard management crew integrate sustainable and organic wine practices at every level. Organic and sustainable philosophies begin with the management of their old vine zinfandel and end with a cork popped on a bottle of The Lucas Winery ZinStar. The Lucas Winery made a commitment to growing the highest quality grapes and produce fine wines that subscribe to environmental standards that reduce the environmental impact of their wine and preserve the integrity of the land for future generations. Their wine club has adopted sustainability as their own. Visitors are treated to an intimate tour of vineyards, taught organic and sustainable viticulture practices, and even given the opportunity to adopt a vine that they will prune, thin, and harvest during the year so that they truly are invested in the quality and longevity of the Lucas Winery wines they enjoy.

By Cam Brown

[MI Sustainable Winegrowing Trip – Day 2](http://5lakesenergy.com/mi-sustainable-wine-growing-trip-day-2/)

Sacramento was clouded in fog this morning. Typical to form that fog, which helps makes growing conditions ideal in Sonoma and Napa, receded by the time we arrived in Sonoma.

Our meetings today revealed two keys insights; **sustainable wine production, whether organic, biodynamic, or sustainable can improve farm practices**, and that **wineries’ commitment to holistic farming and wine production improves retention of skilled labor instilling a sense of ownership over the grape and wine production, which in turn helps improve wine quality**, increase connectedness to the community, and drive innovative farming practices.

We met with Robert LaVine, the Sustainability Manager, for the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission (SWC). In the last year, the Sonoma Winegrape Commission has made a pledge to be [100% certified sustainable by 2019](http://www.sonomawinegrape.org/press-releases/sonoma-county-to-become-nations-first-100-sustainable-wine-region) and has released a [100-year plan](http://www.sonomawinegrape.org/press-releases/winegrowers-unveil-100-year-business-plan-to-preserve-agriculture-in-sonoma-county) to preserve agriculture in Sonoma County. Robert, who has an extensive background in wine sustainability and grower outreach, assists Sonoma county growers with the process of self-assessment and certification. While the goals of the SWC are ambitious, Robert’s straight forward approach to engaging growers draws on the tents of sustainable concepts: improve farming practices through self-assessment and education, maintain outstanding winegrape quality, reduce environmental impact, and preserve ecosystem integrity for future generations of Sonoma County farmers.

[Benziger Family Wineries](http://www.benziger.com/) has been a champion of sustainable wine production in Sonoma sounty over the last twenty years producing a range of wines made from organic, biodynamic, and sustainably certified winegrapes. Chris Benizger welcomed us to their estate nestled in the hills outside Glen Ellen. The history of the property is as diverse as the multiple insectaries placed strategically throughout the property. Originally, the grapes were farmed traditionally, and while production and quality was sufficient, the vines were unhealthy, and the grounds silent. The dramatic need for change sparked a transition to biodynamic farming principles, which reshaped the business strategy, and reinvigorated biotic life on the property. Today, visitors are treated to tours of the vineyards to absorb the impact of, and rationale behind, biodynamic farming principles. Chris Benziger pointed out that his vineyard teams, who have to be highly trained and educated on biodynamic practices, welcomed the transition to biodynamic. They have embraced their role as stewards of the land, which has in turn improved the quality of the wine grapes and the success of the business.

Similarly, John Williams, Owner and Winemaker of [Frog’s Leap Winery](http://www.frogsleap.com/), has found that his vineyard staff compete to work the same vineyard rows each year; their efforts impact the long term health and productive of those rows, and reflect the vineyard team’s ownership in the final product that comes from those grapes. Frog’s Leap, similar to Benziger Family Winery, has blended sustainability into nearly every aspect of vineyard and winery operations. They dry farm organic grapes. Most of the facilities are LEED certified. The winery is a living farm with vegetable and fruit production that allows Frog’s Leap to retain full time staff year after year that are committed to the success of the winery. As John gave us a tour of the Frog’s Leap property, his philosophies and anecdotes are firmly rooted in sustainable wine production, and clearly, it works. John has been making wine in Napa Valley since the 70’s and Frog’s Leap has produced wine from California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) grapes since 1989.

By Cam Brown

[MI Sustainable Winegrowing Trip – Day 3](http://5lakesenergy.com/mi-sustainable-wine-growing-trip-day-3/)

Dave Bos, a Michigan native, has been working in vineyards throughout northern California for the last ten years. To kick off our final day in California, Dave treated us to a rare vineyard tour of [Grgich Hills](http://www.grgich.com/)Zinfandel planted in 1890. Remarkably, the block still produces 2 tons of fruit per acre. For Dave, those vines are living proof of the value and longevity of organic and biodynamic farming practices. Dave runs a vineyard management company that specializes in biodynamic and organic viticulture. Grapes from the plots he manages are used to make some of most reputable wines in Napa.  From Dave’s perspective, sustainability programs and certifications could be designed with flexibility to incorporate organic and biodynamic growers in a manner that both allow growers to adhere to those standards while also encouraging them to participate in a program that has a wider scope.

[The California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance (CSWA)](http://www.sustainablewinegrowing.org/sustainable_winegrowing_program.php) manages the California Sustainable Winegrowing Program (SWP). To date, SWP has reached 10,000 growers and vintners through over 240 educational workshops, which has resulted (as of 2012) in 1,386 vineyards and 391 wineries self-assessing their operations. We were fortunate to meet with almost the full team as CSWA for lunch in San Francisco. Kate Venugopal, Lisa Francioni, and Jodi Wilson gave us an extensive overview on what it takes to develop, implement, and manage a sustainability program and certification that covers every winegrowing region in California. Collectively, the scope of their daily efforts is daunting, and the development of CSWA over the past ten-plus years has taken considerable effort. Yet, they made it clear a sustainability program could be developed in Michigan. It would take time, organization, and commitment, but the resources, knowledge, and willpower exist to make it happen. Furthermore, they reiterated the fact that a sustainability programs and certifications provide valuable resources and knowledge that can improve vineyard and winery operations, while simultaneously reducing environmental impacts, insuring social equity, and meeting significant, and growing, demand from retail and consumers for high quality wines that follow transparent and verified standards.